



Our Lady's Assumption

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Cover art "Assumption of the Virgin" by Dutch painter, Anton Sallaert (1580 - 1650). This oil-on-panel depiction of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary was painted in 1620 in Brussels. Currently, it is in an unidentified private collection in The Hague, Netherlands. The painting is in the Public Domain. *



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The Council of Chalcedon - Introduction

The year is 451 A.D. The place is the city of Chalcedon in Asia Minor. The occasion is the famous Council of Chalcedon, to which Christian history turns back respectfully.

It seems remote from our day and age. Yet, it is linked, with that close unity that is Catholic, to the present moment and to a widespread movement that is capturing the attention of the Catholic world.

Into the assembly of the deliberating Fathers walked the Roman Emperor Marcian. His eyes are eager and he makes a surprising request of the assembly.

“Find for me,” he begs, “the body of God’s Mother. It is my imperial desire and determination to build for it a beautiful shrine. Surely, this immaculate body is the world’s most precious relic and deserves a mighty basilica for its monument. If you will find me the immaculate body of Mary, I will have it sealed in the sacred security of a golden casket and placed under an altar of marble and precious stones. Find for me, I beg of you, reverend Fathers, the body that was once the shrine of the Incarnate Word of God.”

There was a childlike simplicity about the request. The assembled Fathers hesitated. They knew where the bodies of Peter and Paul rested in the honored security of the Vatican. The Cross of Christ, recovered by Saint Helena, mother of Constantine, was once more safe in the keeping of the Church. The bones of the martyrs and the virgins slain during the first days of Christianity had been placed in beautiful reliquaries or under the altars of a thousand churches. However, no city, cathedral, shrine, or reliquary had ever so much as claimed to possess the body of the Mother of God. Her body is a relic the Church has never been permitted to possess.

Then in the midst of the assembly, stands Saint Juvenal, Bishop of Jerusalem. The story he tells is the simple narrative of what happened after the death of Mary, a story that was handed down in the memory of the Christians of Jerusalem. The assembled Fathers knew it well. However, we can imagine the Emperor leaning forward and listening with strained and delighted interest.

An Ancient Narrative

The day had come, said Saint Juvenal, in substance, when the common doom of all Adam’s children was to fall upon the Mother of God. It had fallen upon her Son; now it was to seek out His Mother. Mary lay upon her bed waiting for death.

Time had touched her with a light hand, for it is sin, not time, that ages and destroys. She was beautiful in her maturity and lovely even in the evening of life.

Moved by a common impulse that was the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles, scattered to the far corners of the earth in their apostolate, returned to the deathbed of their Queen. They had clung to her in the terrifying days that followed the death of Christ. They had delayed fearfully about her in the interval that followed the departure of her Son in the Ascension. They were with her in the vitalizing Pentecost when the Holy Ghost came upon them and lifted their timorous spirits to heights of apostolic heroism.

They had gone out to their worldwide mission from her dwelling, the Cenacle, leaving her in the care of John, her adopted son. Yet, she had always been their Mother and Queen, their strength in sorrow, their inspiration in their apostolate, the bond of their unity with one another and with Christ, their Master and her Son.

Mary Dies

Now, with death near, they reassembled about her bed, sons reunited about their dying Mother, messengers of Christ hurrying back to be with Christ's Mother in the last few hours before her soul found its blessed release and escaped joyously into the presence of her Son. What messages they must have entrusted to her, who was so soon to see their beloved Master!

Quietly and without agony she died. There were no lamentations about her deathbed. The hearts of the Apostles were torn with grief as they saw her eyes close in a calm, unbroken sleep and saw her merciful hands fold in a final gesture of prayer upon her breast. Though they realized with a sharp pang that they would never again hear her repeat the story of Christ's thirty hidden years and would never receive her wise counsel and encouragement in their difficult work of world conquest, they could not be sad for long.

Without Christ, the world, they knew, had been an empty place for Mary. Even the Eucharistic Presence of her Son was no adequate substitute for His visible presence. Since the Ascension, she had been patiently waiting for her invitation to follow Him into His kingdom, as she had always patiently waited upon all His wishes. Though she had mothered His Apostles and embraced in a Mother's tenderness the entire world for which He had died, she was waiting eagerly and expectantly for death.

Reverent Burial

Now it came. It came, not as the feared conqueror, but as the blessed liberator, and the Apostles were glad for her sake, even though their own loss was bitterly heavy. She died, and, dying, smiled into the eyes of her Son, come to take her safely through the gates of death into His living presence.

Among the Eastern peoples, burial follows quickly upon death. So, the Apostles, with loving, reverent, if reluctant hands, carried the body of Mary, fair even in death, to the tomb. Her lips still smiled with the final joy of anticipation that flooded her whole being as her soul left her body. Her hands were still clasped in her almost uninterrupted gesture of prayer.

They summoned her friends and relatives, drew the burial garments over her, and mourned and rejoiced. As evening approached, they carried her body to the cool, dark tomb and, closing the grave, returned to her empty dwelling.

Undoubtedly, during that lovely burial, they remembered, abashed and ashamed, another burial in which they had not participated. She had often told them the details of that tragic procession from Calvary to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Shame had filled their hearts as they thought of the cowardice that had held them captive in dark corners and cellars, while the crucified Christ was borne to His borrowed grave by the hands of strangers.

Perhaps they felt that this reverent burial of His Mother was some slight atonement to Christ for their absence from His burial on Good Friday.

Thomas is Again Absent

Characteristically, Saint Thomas arrived a day late. Poor Thomas had a way of being absent when important things took place. Yet, hard as it was on him, his way of arriving after an event was a blessed thing for posterity. Because he missed the first glad reunion of the Apostles with the risen Christ, he gave to our Faith one of its firmest arguments. First, he doubted that Christ had risen; then he laid down his own conditions on which he would accept the fact; and, finally, he carried out those conditions when his searching fingers touched the wounds of Christ, and his hand was laid in convincing proof upon the Savior's side. We can be grateful to Thomas for a kind of scientific skeptic's proof of the Resurrection.

Again, he was late when Mary died. However, if he had been present at the death and burial of Mary, we might never have known that Mary was assumed from the grave.

Deeply regretting that he had not seen Mary in the calm peace of death, Thomas asked the other Apostles to return with him to the tomb and roll back the stone. Thomas wanted to see, for the last time on earth, the face that was the maternal counterpart of the face of the Master he had followed in life and was tirelessly preaching to the people in unresponsive India.

An Empty Tomb

The Apostles, who were more than willing to see that sweet face again, led Thomas to the tomb.

They rolled back the stone, entered the cool, dark doorway, and stopped motionless. Perhaps they were not completely surprised. Certainly, they had no fear that her body was stolen. They must have recognized at once the singular appropriateness of the miracle that copied for the Mother the resurrection of her Son.

The tomb was empty. Where her body had rested, beautiful flowers were blooming. Not the slightest breath of death's corruption blew through the tomb. Instead, it was filled with the perfume of flowers, mingled with scents not of this earth, and the body of Mary was gone.

Perfectly Clean

The Apostles needed no one to explain the miracle. It was clear to the Apostles that the risen Christ had lifted His Mother from the earth. At His command, her soul had rejoined her body, and she was body and soul with her victorious Son in His eternal kingdom.

If the victory of death over the body of Christ was short, its victory over the body that had borne the body of Christ could not be of long duration. Mary had been assumed from earth to heaven.

The Apostles knelt at the empty tomb. They lifted their eyes towards the heavens that now contained Mother and Son, reunited completely. When they rose to their feet again, it was to return rejoicing to the Cenacle, happy knowing the honor that had been paid to Mary, glad that her body was a relic too pure to be housed even in the loftiest shrine of earth.

From that moment on, the Christian world never sought the body of Mary. Christians knew it was reunited with her immaculate soul and that both were with God.

Council of Chalcedon - The Satisfied Emperor

This is the beautiful tradition that Saint Juvenal, Bishop of Jerusalem, repeated for the Emperor Marcian as he sat with his fair wife, Pulcheria, among the venerable Fathers of the Council of Chalcedon.

The Emperor bowed his head in quick and approving assent. That was precisely as it should have been. Why, it could not have been otherwise. He and his Empress looked at each other and smiled their agreement. They rose, and, as they passed through the midst of the Bishops, the last effort had been made, even to so much as consider finding the pure body of God's Mother upon earth. Eyes sought her gladly and spontaneously in heaven. But, the Christians knew that, even were they sure of the place of her tomb, they would find it empty.

An Ancient Tradition

The tradition of Mary's Assumption into heaven is lost in the mists that surround the earliest days of the Church. We find great saints of the Eastern Church preaching on the subject at very early dates. Saint Andres of Crete, Saint John Damascene, and Saint Modestus of Jerusalem talked eloquently of Mary's Assumption in the seventh and eighth centuries. In the Europe of today, Saint Gregory of Tours spoke of the Assumption as a universally accepted fact, and he lived during the years 539 to 594.

From the Beginning

In the Church, as we very well know, the observance of a feast may often precede the wide discussion of a dogma or doctrine. The Apostles and their immediate successors said Mass from the very beginning. Fragments of the prayers they used have come down to us. Yet, theologians discussed the Mass and even invented the name "Mass" much later. In fact, discussions usually arise only when someone has the temerity to deny something that has long been believed or practiced. At first, men use the holy gifts of God gratefully. They accept His revelations and His truths as beautiful and true. They see no particular reason for discussing or cutting into fine argumentative pieces what is clearly beautiful and an intimate part of their life's best devotion.

We find the Christian world keeping the Feast of Mary's Assumption far back in the days when Christians were more interested in loving God than in writing about Him, more interested in showing devotion to Mary than in analyzing the reasons why they did so. Clear records show that, in Palestine, from where Saint Juvenal brought his beautiful tradition to the Emperor at the Council of Chalcedon, the Feast of the Assumption was observed with solemnity before the year 500. How long it was observed before that, no one knows. Records were carelessly kept in those days and what records were written even more easily became lost through persecution and the pillage of barbarians.

We know, however, that feasts did not come into existence easily and quickly and the faithful were reluctant to accept anything new and strange. The Feast of the Assumption was widely celebrated by the year 500, so we may be sure its real origin goes back several centuries. We also know the Feast of the Assumption was celebrated throughout what is now modern France and large parts of Germany by the year 600. France accepted the feast from the ancient monks of Egypt. So, in all probability, those grand old Egyptian monks, who loved Mary with the buoyant enthusiasm one finds in children and saints, had kept the Feast of the Assumption through many centuries.

Worldwide Celebration - Until Protestantism

Every important form of Christianity, schismatic or orthodox, the extensive Greek Catholic Church, as much as the Roman Catholic, agreed in admitting the fitness, beauty, truth, and antiquity of the belief in Mary's Assumption by her Son into heaven. Today, as centuries ago, Roman and Greek Catholics agree in this tradition.

It was left, as their decidedly doubtful privilege, for the Protestants of the sixteenth century to throw aside the tradition and consign the body that had tabernacled Christ to the corruption of the grave.

That attitude was not, however, surprising. In fact, it was in part with the entire Protestant revolt. The early Protestant revolutionists, who attacked the Church with any type of weapon at hand, were equally violent in their attacks upon Mary. The hostility manifested by the sects towards the woman who had loved Christ and served Christ best is something of which modern Protestantism is often deeply ashamed.

From an inconceivable state of mind, the early Protestants demanded that Christ be honored by dishonoring His Mother.

They claimed that Christ could be raised to new heights by dragging down His Mother to new depths. Protestantism's rejection of the Assumption was only part of its astonishing rejection of Mary as Mother and Queen. It almost demanded that Christ leave the body of His Mother to worms and the filth of the tomb, which was a strange, incredible denial of Christ's grateful heart.

The Voice of the People

What has all this to do with us of the immediate present?

Saints are often canonized by the voice of the people. Moved by the dear signs of their heroic virtue, the Christian world cries aloud for their canonization. In ancient days, they rushed to the Vatican, summoned forth the Holy Father, and cried, "Give us a saint." The Holy Father would reply, "The voice of the people is the voice of God. You have a saint."

More recently, the persistent cries of the Christian world hastened the canonization of the Little Flower of Jesus and the Cure d'Ars in similar fashion. It was almost as if the Holy Father had yielded to the voice of the people demanding a saint.

Somewhat the same thing has occasionally occurred in the case of dogmas. The people have clamored that a truth long believed should be proclaimed as divinely revealed, either because they saw their beloved Faith attacked or perhaps because they were moved by a divine impulse to stress some particular article of Faith.

A Clamorous World

An instance of this seems to be taking place about us today. A united Catholic world, suddenly and apparently spontaneously, begs the Holy Father to proclaim the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary into heaven as an article of faith. From every civilized country, petitions signed by millions of names have been sent to the Pope, all begging that Mary be given this signal honor.

The beautiful feast, long observed, with its consoling doctrine, long believed, has rested for centuries in the heart of the Christian world. Catholics have been content to celebrate the day and lovingly cherish their belief. Now they beg that the age-old tradition become a binding dogma. Certainly so widespread and important a demonstration on the part of the faithful cannot be without deep significance. The Holy Spirit has a way of arousing men's hearts to a realization of sharp perils and pressing needs.

Perhaps, as the eyes of the Catholic world are focused on the Assumption of Mary into heaven, the Holy Spirit is drawing men's hearts from the insistent claims of time to the almost forgotten claims of eternity. Surely, the earth has pressed in upon us with a beauty and charm, a luxury and fascination overpowering in their grip on our senses. Can it be that our eyes are lifted at this moment to Mary spurning earth and entering heaven, so, in seeing her glory and watching her triumphant passage through death into eternal life, earth may lose much of its power to fascinate and bind us to itself?

Perhaps the Holy Spirit is using the dogma as a way of showing afresh the importance of pure women. Our modern literature has grown terrifyingly evil. The virtue of women is astoundingly flouted from the screen, from the stage, in magazines, and in best-sellers. Philosophies of loose living have taught young men and women to regard purity as a bit of a joke and to regard vice as the inevitable pastime of youth. Purity has been considered prudery and wanton women have found a widespread and quite frightening popularity with the public.

Now, if ever, the world needs Mary. It needs her purity and her sinlessness. It needs to be reminded that the glory of the Assumption was reserved for the innocent Mother

of God. It needs to be reminded that her body broke the binding chains of the grave because it was so wonderfully pure. The vision of the pure Mary, lifted body and soul into heaven, should do much to bring into sharp relief the beauty of purity, the dignity of motherhood, and the importance to the world of women whose lives are molded on that of the Mother of God.

The World Waits

Whatever the reason for this sudden desire on the part of the Catholic world for a definition of the dogma of the Assumption, we may say that Christendom waits almost on tiptoe for the Holy Father to speak.

Perhaps he will not. Whether the petitions are granted or not, the sudden rebirth of interest in the feast and doctrine of the Assumption has given the modern world a new consciousness of the dignity and splendor of God's Mother. Men have re-awakened to how much Christ prizes purity and virginity. They feel a new interest in the saintly women who follow the flower-marked footsteps of Mary. Youth grows reverent before women who are like their Heavenly Mother.

Almost Inevitable

Until the dawn of Protestant doubt and denial, the Christian world felt that, whatever other traditions might need deep faith and the humble acceptance accorded to mysteries, this was one tradition that simply cried aloud for acceptance. The human heart found the Assumption not only beautiful, but also inevitable.

The body of Mary was unique among all the bodies ever formed to house an immortal soul. It was predestined by God to be the first temple of the Incarnate Divinity. It was the first shrine of God made man. More than that, it was the fountain from which the Holy Spirit drew the sacred materials with which He formed, by an astounding mystery and miracle, the body worn through life by the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Nothing in all human history has been as distinctive as this privilege accorded to Mary's body.

The Purest Body

Art and devotion have never doubted that Mary's body was uniquely beautiful among all the daughters of Eve. "The living ark of the living God," Saint John Damascene

calls her. Uniquely sacred, uniquely beautiful, uniquely honored, from her flesh and blood were taken the flesh and blood of God made man. Within her was performed the mystery of the Incarnation, the central doctrine of Christianity.

All comparisons fail beside the beauty and sacredness of this. The Ark of the Covenant was regarded as sacred by the Jews. It was decorated by the most exquisite art of the period because it held the book of God's laws, the jars of manna, and, for a time, the tablets on which God had graven the Commandments.

When the ark was in danger of falling into pagan hands, the Jewish armies fought with courage and daring that could not be resisted. When, because of the sins of the Jews, the ark fell into the hands of the Philistines, the Hebrew nation mourned in sackcloth and ashes and gathered every ounce of their strength to rescue the precious shrine from the sacrilege that polluted it.

Yet the body of Mary held not the dead elements and records of the Old Law, but the Divine Author and Source of the New Law.

Inviolable Temple

At the gates of the temple built to God by Solomon, in the days before his fall, the people stood in wondering awe. It was the most glorious building they had ever seen; a house worthy of the God they had begged to occupy it. Yet, it was only a building—beautiful and aspiring, but unaccepted by Javeh. Then, suddenly a great shout rose from all. Every throat became a joyous trumpet as the glory of God glowed within the temple. The blinding light that was His shadow overwhelmed them with its power and splendor, and Israel knew that God had accepted the temple, and dwelt in it, through the Shekinah, the faint reflection of His glory settling upon the Holy of Holies.

From that moment, the temple was no mere building of magnificent dimensions, sweeping lines, and throbbing beauty. It was the chosen habitation of God with men. Only the priest might go within the Holy of Holies, empty except for the memory of God's momentarily visible acceptance and presence, and he could only enter after the most elaborate purifications. Nothing defiled dared approach God's home with men.

Unfaithful Israel, in bondage, wept as they thought of the pagan soldiers who had sacked the temple and razed this house of God. Jeremias was only the voice of all Israel lamenting the systematic pillage of God's temple by a filthy enemy.

The temple that Herod later built, God did not deign to honor with His visible presence. Yet, the Jews still regarded the new temple as too sacred for even the touch of pagan sandal because it recalled the former temple that God had chosen.

The Roman Emperor, contemptuous of the Jews' fierce protests, placed his standards in the sanctuary that was sacred to God alone. And Judea groaned in anguish, and then, in futile wrath, rattled its sword.

The Savior, justly angry, whipped from His Father's house those, who polluted it with animals and a trade in coins. After His death, the Jews placed their bodies in death between their temple and the Roman armies that were intent upon destroying it.

A Purer Temple

No one can fail to admire this noble reverence of the Jews for God's chosen temple. It is an instinct that Protestantism is quick to understand and approve. Yet there was a far more important temple. Mary's body was the temple of the living God, not in His vague and reflected glory, but in His most complete, beautiful, and reassuring manifestation. There never was a shrine of the Most High comparable in importance to the fair flesh of the Mother of God Incarnate.

We may almost say that the Christian world has shuddered with even more repugnance at the thought of corruption touching the body of Mary than did the Jews when they thought of the contamination and destruction of the ark and their temple. Mary was the ark and the temple of the God of the New Law.

No Touch of Corruption

Sacrilege is something that appalls even the unbeliever. Yet it would seem little short of sacrilege that the body of Mary, the shrine of God's divine Son, that lovely first temple of the Savior, that walking tabernacle that carried the living presence of Christ among men, that fountain from which was drawn Christ's human nature, should have been left to the cruel corruption of the grave.

Mary had to go through the gateway of death, a destiny from which Christ Himself did not shrink. The common fate of all mankind is not a cruel and terrible thing. It is rather the opening of a barred door, through which men walk from time into eternity. In a moment called death, perishable life is transmuted into life without change or ending.

